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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues in implementing an assessment center in educational management programs at the university level. The assessment center would be used to determine the ability of a student to perform the management work of the principal. Practical work experience should be included as an integral part of an educational management course at the postgraduate level. The following steps for developing an assessment center are discussed: analyze needs; define objectives; secure faculty commitment; analyze job components; analyze organizational climate; develop operating procedures; train assessors; implement the program; develop a postassessment program; and reassess. Costs and values of establishing an assessment center are identified. A conclusion is that an assessment center can play an important role in university-level administrator-education programs and that universities should be prepared to provided competency-based training for their students. Postgraduate education in educational management should qualify students in both theoretical and management competencies. However, other personal qualities valuable for effective leadership--such as community-relations skills, integrity, and professional calling--are hard to measure and should also be considered. Contains 22 references. (LMI)

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IMPLEMENTING AN ASSESSMENT CENTRE IN EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT TRAINING AT UNIVERSITIES

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IMPLEMENTING AN ASSESSMENT CENTRE IN EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT TRAINING AT UNIVERSITIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

The management training of students in the Economic and Management Sciences at universities is already an established practice. The management training of students in other study fields is however a recent occurence, and various forms of management training are presently being offered in study fields other than the Economic and Management Sciences.

Theology offers the compulsory subject congregation management/administration, while the subjects home management and home economic centre management figure in the Home Economics curriculum. Sport management and the management of parks and recreation facilities form components of the field of Recreation Science, and management courses for civil servants and town council members are being presented in Public Administration. Hospital management and ward management are offered in the curriculum for nurses, and consulting room management and office management are included in Medical training. Similar management courses are found in the fields of Law, Social work and other subjects. Universities are also starting to refer to the concept of research management.

In addition to the above, the Education Faculties have introduced educational management as a course. The basis for effective management development of staff in schools is found in management training at tertiary level. Both the scope and complexity of management training at universities has increased during recent years. The current practice involves the theory of management only, whilst a practicum (as in many other academic disciplines) is not included in the curriculum, with the lecturer

not knowing whether the student (i.e. principal) is capable of applying the theory in a practical situation.

Management training within the classroom can never be completely successful. However, an assessment centre could be used to determine the ability of a student (i.e. principal) to do management work. There is a definite need for the inclusion of practical work (i.e. assessment centre) as an integral part of an educational management course at post-graduate level.

2. ASSESSMENT CENTRES AND THE UNIVERSITY

2.1 The task of the university and assessment centres

The task of a university may traditionally be seen as that of researching, teaching and rendering service (Nickerson, 1986:56), while the traditional use of an assessment centre is the selection and identification of management potential. The use of an assessment centre at an university has far reaching implications which are not only limited to the above-mentioned functions. Thornton and Byham (1982) mention other uses of an assessment centre such as diagnostic uses, determination of training needs, management development and self diagnosis. Joines et al. (1986) add the contribution which an assessment centre can make for self development and organization development.

From the above, it appears that the assessment centre should be linked to the task of the university to allow for the meaningful implementation and use of an assessment centre by the university. But consideration must be given to the fact that traditional assessment centres have not adapted to the changing demands placed on them. Consequently, a new type of centre should be created, which will retain the inherent advantages of the present assessment centre method, but which also assesses

for development purposes (Griffiths and Allen, 1987:20) and is tailor made for implementation at universities.

The most important contribution of an assessment centre at universities is the management training of students. The role of an assessment centre is two fold, concerning the student on the one hand, and the training programme on the other hand.

2.2 The student and the assessment centre

The university has a unique function in the creation of academic training opportunities for the development of the student. Use of the assessment centre as a diagnostic method can offer guidance to the student regarding career planning. Greater insight into the identification of strong and weak points in management style can be attained by a student through use of a assessment centre (Gilbert and Jaffee, 1981:17). The biggest problem in the use of an assessment centre at universities lies in the fact that, while some students make an effort to improve their identified weak points, others do nothing concerning the matter. The university also does not supply any specific training programme to develop management skills (Ogawa, 1986:54). For the above reasons, the assessment centre at universities is presently being used more for informative uses than for training purposes.

Intensive classroom training in management should be coupled with opportunities for the practising of management skills and the necessary feedback should be given (Byham, 1986:42). The assessment centre is particularly suitable for this purpose because the management ability of the student can be observed in specific management dimensions.

Furthermore, consideration must be given to the fact that differentiated and individualized education is an accepted didactic principle (Nickerson, 1986:57), the truth of which is seldom realized at university level. The assessment centre creates the opportunity for differentiated and individualized management training by training each student in the manage-

ment dimensions identified as specific development areas, and not just developing the same management skills in all students. In this regard, Langdon (1982) requested that an **Individual Management Development Program** be devised. Millward et al. (1986:1) have also stated that the emphasis in their **Principal's Certification Program** should be placed on the achievement of management competencies rather than on the completion of an assortment of courses - a viewpoint which surely requires further investigation.

2.3 The training programme and the assessment centre

Good achievement or a distinction in a management course based on the present training methods is by no means an indication of what the student's achievement in the actual work situation will be. Management training courses at universities are often unsuccessful regarding content validity, due to a lack of a direct link with actual management practice. Furthermore, the management courses are mainly theoretical in nature, presented in the form of lectures and occasional work seminars.

A further query relates to whether lectures on leadership, decision making and delegation, for example, actually lead to improved practice of these management skills (Mauriel, 1987:5). It has not yet been possible to determine the effectiveness of classroom training in the work situation (McCleary, 1986:52). Thornton and Byham (1982:327) are of the opinion that the existing management courses are "often wasted or even counter productive because the wrong person went through the program, he or she was trained in the wrong thing, or the training came too late or too early in the individual's career to be used effectively". The result of poor diagnosis is that the management training programme often trains the wrong people about the wrong things at the wrong time.

Kelley (1984:1) maintains that the assessment centre is at present "the best available approach" to the improvement of the quality of management training courses at universities. McCleary (1986:51) also states that the

university can contribute to the student's early experience of management work through use of an assessment centre.

Traditional examination procedures test mainly the cognitive ability of a student, and do not evaluate competencies in basic management ability required in the work situation. In this regard Kelley (1986:48) maintains that both academic knowledge and practical competency should be pre-requisites for an academic management qualification. Byham (1986:46) therefore rightfully states that "the assessment center methodology is an excellent method of establishing the validity and effectiveness of the training program".

The problems associated with other methods currently in use concern the fact that it is difficult to determine the validity of the contents; whether there is a correlation between the contents of the evaluation programme and the real job, and, what the strong and weak qualities of a person in a real job situation would be.

3. ESTABLISHING AN ASSESSMENT CENTRE AT A UNIVERSITY

Two methods can be used to establish an assessment centre at a university. The first is to "purchase" an existing assessment centre, and the second is to develop one which is then tailor-made for one's specific needs. To develop one's own assessment centre the following steps or stages can be followed. The sequence of steps presented is an approximation; a number of them may be carried out simultaneously (cf. Boehm and Hoyle, 1977; Frank, Sefcik and Jaffee, 1983; Van der Westhuizen, 1987).

Stage 1 : Needs analysis

The purpose for which the assessment centre will be used must first be determined, e.g. selection, identification, or management development. A specific needs analysis may also arise from a particular problem area

within management. Therefore, the need for the assessment centre must be determined.

It must be remembered that an assessment centre must be part of the total educational management programme of the university.

Stage 2: Define objective of assessment centre

The aims of objectives of an assessment centre, as well as its integration into the total management development programme must be clearly defined.

According to Jeswald (1977:53), numerous decisions must be taken in the course of establishing an assessment centre but none as far reaching as the decision concerning objectives.

Stage 3: Secure faculty commitment

Without the support of the faculty and the involvement of senior members of staff, the likelihood of the assessment centre being a success will be slight. If the assessment centre is indeed established, its continuance should be included in the organization's (i.e. the university's or faculty's) policy.

Stage 4: Job analysis:[1]

An exhaustive task analysis must be conducted. The purpose of this is to determine the actions or clusters of job activities (managerial tasks or dimensions) that constitute important aspects of the manager's job. These clusters or dimensions consist of the kinds of things managers actually do during their work day, the specific tasks in a specific post, and the functional activities (job situations) linked to the particular post. The job analysis therefore determines the dimensions necessary to carry out the job activities effectively (Thornton and Byham, 1982:127).

Both occasional and pertinant managerial tasks must be determined. Therefore, the dimensions or skills assessed should be derived from the analysis of a cluster of jobs in education (i.e. principals posts), and must be universal to all principals' posts (cf. Jeswald, 1977:53). If an

analysis of the post in question is not conducted, it will be impossible to ascertain which managerial tasks should be evaluated, or whether those evaluated do, in fact, pertain to the post or job at hand.

The job analysis allows, therefore, for the determination of job situation characteristics. This implies that every assessment centre would have a universal as well as an individual facet. Relevant literature should also be consulted at this stage on the tasks of the manager, e.g. school principal.

Stage 5: Organizational climate analysis

This entails an analysis of the organizational climate, the purpose of which is to determine the climate of the school when certain specific aspects are eliminated. Several questionnaires have been developed in education for this purpose.

In this stage, the data have to be interpreted and handled with extreme caution. In contrast to the climate analysis for only one organization (e.g. in industry), this analysis in education is undertaken in various schools, with the result that the data will reflect only certain trends in the organizational climate, differing from school to school. Certain tendencies will thus be discovered in an attempt to ascertain what the organizational climate in education should be.

Stage 6: Develop operating procedures

This stage consists of three steps. Firstly, the exercises to be used in the assessment centre must be developed. These simulation exercises usually consist of a group exercise, an in-basket and a one-to-one situation exercise. The exercises to be developed must be simulations based upon the job analysis, i.e. actual practice. Secondly, the dimensions (managerial tasks or skills) to be evaluated in each exercise must be determined. These skills are usually critical to successful job performance.

Certain criteria may be used to identify these dimensions, i.e. the relevance for effective job performance, its observability, its application in

specific exercises, and the trainability of the dimension (Thornton and Byham, 1982:130). Thirdly, the administrative material for the administrator, the assessor, and the participant must be developed, and the operating procedures must be established.

Stage 7: Train assessors

The next step is to train the assessors. They must preferably be persons in higher post levels than the participants. At least one person should also be trained as an administrator for the operational functioning of the assessment centre.

Stage 8: Implementation

Finally, after determining the participants for the assessment (they may be post-graduate students in Educational Administration, persons who have been recommended, or people in promotion posts whose managerial capabilities have to be developed), the actual assessment process may proceed.

Stage 9: Develop post-assessment centre programmes

After completion of the assessment process, management development programmes must be initiated and activated to intercept and rectify possible flaws identified.

Stage 10: Reassessment

If necessary, and if preferred, a participant may be re-evaluated to determine whether the required management development has taken place.

4. THE VALUE OF AN ASSESSMENT CENTRE

The value of an assessment centre lies in the following (Brush and Schoenfeldt, 1980:68-69; Van der Westhuizen, 1987:196-197):

* The assessment centre is currently the best available method for the development of management potential.

* It may equip one to do a better managerial job.

* It may select the right person for a specific job.

* Management selection and development takes place according to reliable, objective and valid criteria.

* Observers improve their own managerial capabilities by observing other people's managerial actions.

* It gives an indication of the weaknesses in an individual's managerial ability, which may then be improved.

* An individual's actual managerial action is observed in a simulated job situation.

* Evaluation is carried out on the basis of actual managerial action, and not on some supposed (theoretical) managerial action.

* It provides additional information for the appointment of an individual in a specific post, so that the appointment is not based solely on reports, popularity, didactical success or interviews.

* Participants obtain positive feedback on their managerial actions.

* An assessment centre forms the basis for purposeful management development.

* A better decision in the selection of a candidate may be based on both **previous** achievements, and **expected** managerial achievement.

* It is highly oriented to individual and interpersonal behaviour under various circumstances.

5. CERTAIN PROBLEMS

5.1 The position of an assessment centre during a training programme has not as yet been finalised. Does it belong at the beginning, middle or at the end of a management course? Should the course progress from knowledge to skills, or should diagnosis first take place and then progress to theory or knowledge?

5.2 It is not possible for a university to operate a full-time assessment centre because of limited manpower.

5.3 A further problem which exists is the doubt concerning whether certain management dimensions can actually be learnt and improved. Is it actually able to improve a person's judgement or analytical ability? It is certainly true that leaders or managers can be developed, but this takes a long time.

5.4 The level at which the assessment centre should be used has also been questioned. Traditionally post-graduate training consists of training in research, including the mastering of certain research methods. If an assessment centre should form part of the training programme on post graduate level, it must never detract from research training.

5.5 The costs involved in the operation of an assessment centre also seem to be a problem. It would be difficult to obtain extra fees from students over and above class fees. Contributions from private organisations would be of great assistance in this matter.

5.6 It would be impractical and even impossible to operate an assessment centre which lasts for four or five days. Definite attempts would have to be made to use the assessment centre in the most time effective manner.

6. ADJUSTMENTS

6.1 The university would have to consider the use of computerized and interactive video programmes in the implementation of a more time and cost effective assessment centre.

6.2 The use of checklists can be developed for certain exercises. A computerized and coded report form can be developed for feedback reports by the administrator.

6.3 A system of self-assessment and self development must be developed and implemented.

6.4 New research (cf. Byham, 1986; Millward and Ashton, 1987) has shown that the assessment centre can also be used for assessing teaching skills. This could have a positive impact in changing many traditional methods of teacher training and result in the modification of the existing micro teaching programmes. A pre-teacher assessment centre can measure a person's ability to teach (Millward and Gerlach, 1987:1). The first pre-teacher assessment centre programme will be implemented in the USA in 1989.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions may be made from the above:

7.1 An assessment centre can certainly play an important role at a university;

7.2 A university should be willing to assist in the development of a student's management potential with the aid of an assessment centre;

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7.3 An assessment centre could be used in various ways during training and research;

7.4 Universities should be prepared to broaden traditional training methods so as to make provision for competency based training for management students.

7.5 An academic qualification on post-graduate level in educational management should include both achievement in theoretical knowledge and management competencies.

In conclusion, it must, however, be remembered that the total person must be considered in management training. Assessment centres are mainly routinized and behaviouristic. Zakariya (1983:21) stated that "most of the characteristics of successful principals are not easily measured. You can measure the simple things, but even if a candidate has these minimal competencies, it's no guarantee he'll be a good principal". Acceptibility by the community, integrity and professional calling are certainly as important as the competencies for successful management.

Note

1. For more detail on the procedure of a job analysis see Thornton and Byham (1982:95-140). For an example of a job analysis interview guide see Spanneberg and Esterhuyse (1985:55-67).

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